



BUDDHISM: CHRONICLE OF A DELUSION

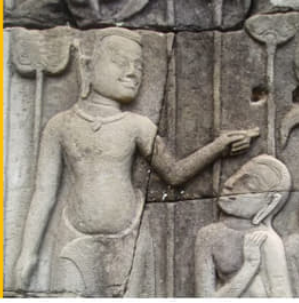
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We give below a review of the recent book by Marion Duvauchel, entitled, [*Bouddhisme, chronique d'une illusion*](#) (*Buddhism: Chronicle of a Delusion*), which is a meticulous dismantling of the fabrication known as "Buddhism." We are hoping that this book will soon be available in English. For those who are able to read French, please support Dr. Duvauchel's important work and [purchase a copy](#).

Universal religion, wisdom, spirituality, philosophy or brilliant syncretism—Buddhism is a religious as well as a historical enigma. But it appeals to the entire bobo class fond of cheap spirituality: we fold a leg, we join our hands and we wait for the sovereign peace of the Buddha with his silly smile (or suave, it depends). To be clear, the doctrines of appeasement are witchcraft! But the "fiction of the Buddha" accompanies the meditation techniques supposed to bring the peace of the "Blessed One," techniques that have recently been implanted in our educational system, in the hope of calming children down whom distracted parents have been careful not to educate and instead have irritated them. And this fiction of the Buddha is solidly implanted in the common culture.

As for this common knowledge about the Buddha's religion, we know almost nothing about how it was developed. However, the fascination that Buddhism exerts today cannot be defeated without an analysis, nourished by the weight of European Orientalism in the diffusion of this religious phenomenon—in others, successful propaganda. Scholarly, prestigious, erudite and then popularizing propaganda. But propaganda nevertheless.



Bouddhisme

CHRONIQUE D'UNE ILLUSION

Marion Duvauchel



This work of elucidation is what *Bouddhisme, chronique d'une illusion* [*Buddhism, Chronicle of a Delusion*] is about. In ten chapters, the book examines three centuries of Orientalist historiography: the infatuation of Europeans for India, the fascination for the "old ageless texts," the discoveries haloed by sensationalism, the occulted aspects, the thorny question of Indian languages and writings, including Kharosthi. And the frauds—archaeological and intellectual. All this in a historical and political context that scholarly works rarely take into account, and for good reason—they rely precisely on this field of knowledge with improbable foundations without ever questioning it. The chapter on the four Generals of that potentate of the Punjab (Ranjit Singh), as intelligent as he was illiterate, carries the weight of history as well as that of the singular men, intrepid mavericks, atypical mercenaries who also built the history of Central Asia (Middle Asia), where Buddhism had found new lands for its missions, where it

had taken root in a different spiritual climate and by multiplying the Buddhas who became "bodhisattvas."

Let us draw out some of the constitutive features of this religion with mythical contours. First, the founder, an Indian prince, raised in a bubble of opulence, who discovers one fine morning the incarnate condition of humanity in its most distressing modalities, death, illness and old age. Then, the canon and the doctrine—an elusive thing, nourished by oral traditions that nothing attests to; tirelessly taken up again and again, enriched, renewed, glossed and commented upon. And then, the factors of the transmission of this canon—a marvelous narrative no matter the current that bears it, in Pali as in Sanskrit, and which was only put into writing in the 18th century (the *Lalitavistara*). Let us add for good measure, what may be called the "inculturation of Buddhism" beyond India, its cradle, and the depth of this Central Asia that the Russians call "Middle Asia," where the "bodhisattvas of Serindia" were born. Finally, the multiplicity of currents, cults and magico-religious practices that developed in Tibet after the first schisms and the session of the two "vehicles," giving a system of grandiose magic and fabulous pantheons that have nothing to do with primitive Buddhism but are, on the contrary, late constructions.

It was the French, English, German, Russian and Dutch researchers who, fascinated by the "old ageless texts" of India, gradually elaborated this "fiction of the Buddha." All this was not without discussion. Three centuries were necessary to finally impose the idea of the Buddha's historicity, of his canon, of his gesture and of his miracles, a historicity in which scholars, academics and translators, all great skeptics before the Lord when it comes to the religion of their own childhood, pretended to believe. One cannot do without a hermeneutic, a structure of interpretation. The religious vocabulary used by European orientalism is that of Catholic theology. It is by the yardstick of Catholicism, suavely denied, that all these orientalist analyzed what came down to them from India and Asia and which they have reconstituted as the history of the Buddha and Buddhism. Duly popularized by the prolific and talented pen of René Grousset, it has rendered a constituted knowledge, universally accepted, to which Sylvain Lévi affixed his definitive seal (*Génie de l'Inde*), discarding in passing the part taken by the Christian missionaries, who could not be considered as founders, or even as precursors.

In 2004, however, Peter Skilling [threw a spanner](#) in the works of Buddhist studies by questioning the relevance of the usage that establishes a necessary link between "Theravada" and the Paleo Canon—he established that this usage is the product of norms established in Europe from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the following century, and that this reinvented Theravada, mainly English-speaking, had progressively gained an international influence, including among Asian

Buddhists themselves. He makes it clear that the nomenclatures that have been legitimately used are not based on vernacular sources but largely on assertions imposed by the scientific community. The term "Buddhism" itself was challenged by a Sinhalese exegete as nonsense invented by Europeans. A Minnesota researcher, David Dreuwen, established in 2020 in a meticulous article that three centuries of research have never been able to "scientifically" establish the historicity of this Indian prince who became a "bhikshu."

The first chapter of *Buddhism, Chronicle of a Delusion* takes up this problematic issue and reinforces Dreuwen's thesis. How the Buddha, for a long time held to be a legendary being by Orientalists themselves, progressively became a historical personality is, in fact, explained by the Orientalists themselves: "Without the Buddha, Buddhism is inexplicable."

These European zealots include, the honest Frenchman Eugene Burnouf (founder of Buddhology); the dubious Thomas William Rhys Davids who founded with his theosophist wife the profitable Pali Text Society and who was accused of embezzlement in Ceylon where he was stationed and had to leave after a trial; the improbable theosophists, like Henry Steel Olcott and the Buddhist monks whose European origins are hidden by colorful monastic names, of which the most representative were Nânatiloka (alias, Anton Walther Florus Gueth) and Ananda Metteyya (alias, Charles Henry Allan Bennett, the same one who coined the expression "Theravâda Buddhism" with the meaning we know today).

And then there was the Levi "clan," which gave French Indianism all its prestige, and which today nourishes the hagiography of current research.

Each structural aspect of Buddhism is analyzed in the ten chapters of this book, which carefully examines data that is often hidden, little known, rarely cited, along with theories that are accepted and established on very shaky ground, but to which the prestigious status of what is called "institutional orientalism" or "learned orientalism" gives the entire weight of academia.

The first Indianists—Auguste Barth, Abel Bergaigne, Johan Kern—were Sanskritists before they were "Indologists." They translated these "old ageless texts" (the formula is from Louis Renou) which fascinated them but which turned out to be much less ancient than what was believed and allowed to be believed for a long time. But to do orientalist research, one must also be able to date the material. India is one of those civilizations that remained as if immobile at the threshold of history, fascinating

indeed but not very inclined to give dates—such goes history. Hence the importance of the pillars of Ashoka, the third king of the Maurya dynasty, the one who completed the first—and very brief—unification of India in Asian history.

Ashoka was changed into a marvelous king who promoted the Buddhist ideal after a spectacular conversion. In reality, Ashoka is a common example in the history of empires, of the alliance of politics and religion. Nothing to be moved by. He was an exemplary king—a great one at that—in that he knew how to use a religion that was not yet established, for the purpose of unifying that first great Indian state, the Maurya Empire. He organized a police empire and knew how to exploit this proto-Buddhism for the purposes of surveillance and control of a territory that went as far as Gandhara and a whole area that has since been called the "Hellenized East." Is the "Dharma" that he promotes in his edicts Buddhist law? This has been believed for so long that the matter seems to have been settled. If he were a great king, it is also because he understood the interest of writing—we owe to him the first Indian alphabets, even if this fact is disputed by Indian researchers.

Buddhism as a religious fact cannot be dissociated from this epistemological history, from this history of the nascent and then growing science of Orientalism—a history of dazzling or patient discoveries. The English, who took over India and ousted the French and the Dutch, took the lion's share of the work, but they also knew how to collaborate with European researchers. This is the case of the deciphering of Indian writing, attributed to James Prinsep, but which in reality was a collective work.

Marion Duvauchel's work focuses on this history of Orientalist research and its key discoveries, such as Burnouf's monumental work as a defector; Princeps' deciphering of Indian scripts; and the collection of coins by these "first excavators" whose history is now being unearthed thanks to Jean-Marie Lafont's thesis; the work of Emile Sénart, a rich man married to an even richer woman, an atypical man without rank or academic title who supported French Indianism with his relations as well as his fortune and who tried to open some breaches in the stilted world of a rigid research. And then, Russian orientalism, decapitated by Bolshevism which sent some of the researchers to the gulags of sinister memory.

It is appropriate to give a special place to the art of Gandhara and to Alfred Foucher's contributions, rendered obsolete by current research (especially by the Russians), and which, on the other hand, has given pride of place to the much more profound interpretations of Daniel Schlumberger. In 1973, at the time of his death, Gérard Fussman paid him homage, recalling not without disloyalty the episode during which the archaeologist of Bactria had laid out his thesis on the birth of Buddhism. For Schlumberger, it

was born from the meeting of an Indian genius (or of a group of Indians in search of truth) with the members of the Greek "philosophical sects" which lived in India, since the lightning raid of Alexander and the kingdoms of the Diadochoi who followed this brilliant conquest. Schlumberger thus questions the accepted dating of the existence of the "first" Buddha. This thesis, deeply argued and methodically presented by a man who knew he was at death's door, broke the conventional wisdom of official Indianism. It received a frosty reception, was never re-examined and has only recently been mentioned by a courageous Indian academic.

Where does Buddhism come from? How was it born? The enigmatic founder does not explain everything. Indians consider Buddhism to be just one of a multitude of sects, and they are astonished to see their country associated with the religious brilliance of a religion that deserted it in the 8th century. It was not until the 21st century that a true anthropology of Hinduism appeared, reminding us of what Buddhology had erased: the central concepts of Buddhism (Dharma and Karma in particular) were derived from classical Brahmanism. It was Madeleine Barbraud's honor to have undertaken this work. With Louis Renou they renewed the whole of Indianism. Without successors.

And the Catholic World in all This?

There was the work of Cardinal de Lubac who gave us two major books, including *Amitaba*, which he was able to write thanks to the archives of the Guimet Museum that were freely opened to him. How can we explain that after the Second Vatican Council, while the quality of his work on Buddhism gave him intellectual legitimacy, he was excluded from the committees of interreligious dialogue? No doubt that once again, the Church chose mediocrity which, today, is spread out in all the instances of inter-religious dialogue.

The Iranian spirit was not foreign to the transformations that renewed Indian Buddhism or that took it to another cultural land. And this spirit was imbued with gnosis. Born in Alexandria, it came to die in the East, in the third century AD, but not before nourishing that great flow of Manichaeism—and those multiple rivers of Buddhism, inhabited by the multiplicity of bodhisattvas who have supplanted the proto-Victorian Buddha that Europe has resurrected with great spiritual antics.

It was during this 3rd century that a new prophet arose at the confluence of the three religious zones—the Iranian Mandaean and Zoroastrian, the Indian Buddhist and Hinduist and the Christian already nibbled away by heretical sects. Mani modestly claimed to assume in his person Buddha, Jesus and

Zoroaster. From Buddhism, he assumed all the legendary and mythological apparatus; from Christianity he copied the militant organization, the practice of confession and the literary forms.

But with Manichaeism, everything became blurred. Gnosis dissolved borders, limits and categories. What remained was the idea that all along the Silk Roads three great religions spread out to China: Buddhism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity.

Throughout its improbable history, Buddhism never stopped changing. Borrowing here—including undoubtedly from Christianity—accommodating there, it underwent such transformations that to account for it one has to end up imagining a primitive Buddhism of Pali tradition (Theravada) of which Sri Lanka would be the depositary, while a current of Sanskrit language developed in North India and beyond the inventive and popular Mahayana, intended for the multitudes whom the complex asceticism to reach Nirvana would otherwise repel. In this historically more recent version, Buddhism still revealed itself as prodigiously Indian.

Let us give the last word on this point to Ernest Renan, who took a sharp, lucid and caustic look at Buddhism:

"Drunk with the supernatural, led astray by the dangerous taste it had of playing with the infinite and of losing itself in mad enumerations, India pushed its chimera to the extreme, and thus violated the first rule of religious fantasy, which is to be measured in delirium and to feign according to the analogies of a certain truth."

Buddhism, an illusion? A fiction? A mirage?

Yes, in other words—a chimera.

Featured: Heracles as Vajrapani of the Buddha. Detail from a panel. Gandhara, 2nd century AD.

